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Fact Sheets Concerning Respiratory Disease Symptoms

Please retransmit the attached fact sheets concerning respiratory disease symptoms to all local public health jurisdictions and other appropriate healthcare organizations within your state/district. In case you are asked by medical personnel or the general public, these fact sheets contain commonly asked questions with answers concerning these respiratory disease symptoms.

You will also receive this document via email.

RESPIRATORY DISEASE SYMPTOMS FACT SHEET FOR MEDICAL PERSONNEL

What are the health effects from exposure to fine particulate matter?

Besides local eye and mucus membrane irritation, effects include reduction in lung function, inflammatory changes in the lung, asthma exacerbations, decreased heart rate variability, and increases in all cause and cardiac mortality within days of the air pollution event.

Mucus membrane irritation may result in symptoms of a cold, such as runny nose and cough, but should not be accompanied by fever, leukocytosis, or other signs of infection.

What determines how severe the effects are, and the proportion of people who experience the health effects?

The level of the particulate matter pollution (measured in micrograms per cubic meter of air), the duration of the elevated concentration, and the chemical constituents of the pollution all play a role in how severe the health effects are. Higher levels are associated with a higher proportion of the population being affected. While the chemical constituents of the air pollution in this setting are not known with certainty, particulate matter resulting from burning is generally considered more harmful than dust.

Who is likely to experience adverse health effects from this exposure?

Persons with pre-existing cardiac or pulmonary disease are more likely to be affected. In particular, persons with asthma, chronic obstructive pulmonary disease, and coronary artery disease are at greatest risk for more severe health effects.

In previous major air pollution exposures, elevated mortality rates in all age groups have been observed, with the greatest increases seen at the extremes of age.

Are masks useful for reducing exposure to dust and smoke?

Well-fitted masks may reduce dust and smoke exposure for field responders. However, a poorly fitted mask may actually increase exposure by providing a false sense of safety.

If health problems are thought to be associated with exposure to air pollution, should medical management be different?

In general, no. Medical management of the health condition should not change because it was associated with exposure to particulate matter. Prudent steps to reduce exposure to air pollution are appropriate. Advice to use air conditioners, to remain indoors, and to avoid increasing minute ventilation are appropriate.

Will these exposures result in any long term adverse health consequences?

Short duration high intensity exposures are more likely to result in short term effects than in long term effects. Studies that have associated exposure to elevated levels of particulate matter with long term health effects have generally had very long exposure periods, years of exposure for example.

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, September 12, 2001, 2:10 AM (EDT)

RESPIRATORY DISEASE SYMPTOMS FACT SHEET FOR THE GENERAL PUBLIC

Is there anything I can do to prevent exposure to the dust in the air?

Yes, to reduce your exposure to the dust in the air, try to stay indoors as much as possible. And, if you have an air conditioner, you should consider using it and keeping your windows closed to reduce the amount of dusty, smoky air you breathe.

If you do need to be outside, try to limit your time outdoors, and avoid heavy activity.

Are masks useful for reducing exposure to dust and smoke?

Well-fitted masks may reduce dust and smoke exposure. However, a poorly fitted mask may actually increase exposure by providing a false sense of safety.

Will the dust in the air make me ill?

You may have inhaled smoke from the fire or dust from the buildings. The short-term effects of breathing smoke and dust may include lung irritation, coughing, sneezing, a runny nose, and in more severe cases, shortness of breath, dizziness, or fainting.

People with asthma, other lung conditions, or heart disease may be more affected by the dust and smoke, and may need to see their healthcare provider.

How do I know that I am sick from the dust or smoke, and not from an infection?

Smoke and dust exposures can cause coughing, sneezing, a runny nose, and shortness of breath, but not other typical signs of infectious illness such as rash, fever, headaches, bleeding, or diarrhea. If you do develop signs of an infectious illness, you should contact your healthcare provider.

What should I do if I think I am sick from breathing the smoke or dust?

It is not necessary to visit an emergency room or physician if you are suffering from minor conditions such as eye irritation, coughing, or sneezing. However, if you are having more serious symptoms such as shortness of breath, chest pain or discomfort, or loss of consciousness, you should see a physician. These symptoms may develop as late as a week after the smoke or dust exposure.

Will I have any long-term health effects from breathing the smoke or dust?

Probably not since your exposure to the smoke and dust is likely to be for only a short period of time. Studies have shown that people who suffered long-term health effects from breathing smoke or dust had been exposed for years.

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The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) protects people's health and safety by preventing and controlling diseases and injuries; enhances health decisions by providing credible information on critical health issues; and promotes healthy living through strong partnerships with local, national and international organizations.

DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH AND HUMAN SERVICES